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SUBJECT: BENIN: DRAFT DESIGNATION OF NEW PROVINCIAL CAPITALS SPARKS  
PROTESTS.

1. (U) SUMMARY: The Minister of Decentralization and Local Communities, Issa Demole Moko, publicized a government plan to designate capital cities for six provinces that were formerly administered out of neighboring provincial capitals. The proposed arrangement reflected proposals put forward by a technical committee set up by the Ministry of Decentralization. In order to calm protests in the targeted provinces, the GOB declared that the publicized decision constituted a draft and warranted further study. The GOB stated that the 1999 legislation governing the administrative and territorial organization of Benin would be amended in order to satisfy the population's concerns. END SUMMARY.

2 (U) On October 6, the Minister of Decentralization and Local Communities announced on TV the selection of administrative capitals for six provinces which are currently administered out of the capitals of their immediate neighbors. The decision resulted from an assessment produced by a technical committee at the Ministry of Decentralization. The plan proposed administrative capitals for the provinces of Atlantique, Plateau and Couffo in southern Benin, the province of Collines in central Benin and the provinces of Donga and Alibori in the north. The city of Ouidah was selected as the capital of the province of Atlantique, the city of Aplahou for the province of Couffo, the city of Pobh for the province of Plateau, the city of Savalou for the province of Colline, the city of Djougou for the province of Donga and the city of Kandi for the province of Alibori. Demole Moko stated that the choice of these six capital cities was based on well-defined criteria provided by a 1999 law, the Act No 97-028 relating to the organization of the territorial administration in the Republic of Benin. These criteria included the size of the population of provinces, their economic resources, the administrative and infrastructural facilities they possess, their geographical location and their historical traditions. Former president Kerekou's first government (1996-2001) initiated Act No 97-028 as part of the administrative reforms necessary for a smooth implementation of the decentralization and de-concentration policies that Benin embraced since 1999. According to Demole Moko, his ministry's plan seeks to conform to Act No 97-028.

3 (U) The announcement sparked protests in some of the six provinces. While in the northern provinces of Alibori and Donga, the population appeared to approve the new arrangement, the populations of the provinces of Atlantique, Couffo, Plateau and Zou expressed strong discontent during protest marches and in vitriolic declarations against the government. Protestors claim that the Ministry's proposal is not based on sound criteria but reflects regional bias and ethnic gerrymandering. A case in point, in the province of Collines, dominated by the Nago ethnic group, Savalou, a city inhabited by the minority Mahi ethnic group was selected to be the capital city for that province.

4 (SBU) In a TV broadcast On October 10, Demole Moko renounced the decision, acknowledging that the Technical Committee had failed to take into account a number of aspects pertaining to sociological factors in the designation of the 6 capital cities. He stated that

the Council of Ministers had asked him to conduct another survey in order to draft a proposal that would meet popular approval in the six provinces. On October 16, President Yayi installed a committee tasked with writing a bill for a new administrative division plan on a one-month deadline. The new draft will subsequently be submitted to the National Assembly for consideration and adoption. Thus, Act No 97-028 related to the organization of the territorial administration in the Republic of Benin appears to be obsolete and slated to be adjusted to the current economic and sociological situation.

5 (U) In 1999, former President Kerekou's government issued Act No 97-028 to turn into twelve the six initial provinces inherited from colonial rule. Each of the initial six provinces had its capital city. Assignment of capitals to the 6 newly created provinces is still pending. The twelve provinces are currently governed by 6 "prefets" (prefects, high ranking civil servant who represent the State at the level of a province) based in the six original provinces, Mono, Littoral, Oueme, Zou, Borgou, and Atacora. In order to seat "prefets" in the 6 newly created provinces, the GOB must select cities to serve as capitals. However, neither President Kerekou nor his successor, President Soglo, fully implemented Act No 97-028. Then as now, the designation as presented in Act No 97-128 bore great political risk.

(SBU) COMMENT: Initially, the public hailed the Yayi administration's decision to tackle this issue as a sign of the GOB's commitment to a better administration policy that would bring central government closer to the 6 provinces. However, given the tense political situation prevailing in the country, commentators question the advisability of announcing the designation of capitals at this point. The issue is a political "hot potato", and as such is

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rife to be exploited by President Yayi's political opponents to foment protests. The Minister of Decentralization's announcement may have been made to gauge popular response to the decision. As such it was a tactical error which opened the GOB to criticism by the opposition for a perceived lack of coordination and cohesion within the administration when the announcement had to be revoked.  
END COMMENT.

BOUSTANI